

08.09.07: San Joaquin Valley High-Speed Rail Special Session

California demonstrated vision and leadership in overcoming political and financial obstacles to build the Central Valley Project, the State Water Project, the Golden Gate Bridge, the great university systems and much more. Let's add the California high-speed rail system to the long list of world-class projects.

August 9, 2007

How long does it take to build a bridge, a dam, and a water storage system? The Golden Gate Bridge took just four years from inception to completion. The Central Valley Water project was largely completed in 1956 - some 19 years after construction began. And the initial facilities of the State Water Project were fully functioning just 13 years after voter approval in 1960.

But the California High-Speed Rail project is now at 20 years and counting. In 1988, Assemblymember Jim Costa and I then a Senator-authored laws (AB 1856 and SB 1307, respectively) to build a super high-speed rail system between Southern California and Northern California. There are numerous reasons why California has been so slow in completing this project. But now, there is every reason to get the California High-Speed Rail project moving, and get it moving immediately.

As I've traveled this great state during 32 years of public service, there has been one constant, inescapable reality: our transportation infrastructure - the arteries of our state's economy - is deteriorating. Our roads are aging, becoming more and more congested, and soon they will simply be unable to handle the hordes of traffic to come as our population explodes to a projected 60 million people over the next 50 years. Gridlock is not over the horizon - it's here now, and it's just going to get worse.

So what to do? We could build more highways. But how smart would it be to encourage more driving and more carbon fuel consumption when we're already experiencing the damaging effects of global warming? Instead, we need to build super high-speed rail systems from San Diego to Sacramento, San Jose and San Francisco.

Italy, Spain, France, Germany and Japan already have these modern, efficient, environmentally sound transportation systems. California has the ideal geography for this mode of transportation.

This would, of course, mean a fundamental change in the way we move about in car-loving California. But such a dramatic shift isn't unprecedented. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Legislature have already helped make California the national leader in decreasing carbon emissions and addressing the climate crisis. What we need now is to lead once again by approving a proposal to finance one of the world's longest -- and this nation's most efficient -- long distance transportation systems.

When compared with estimated future auto and air travel between Southern and Northern California, high-speed rail will cut carbon dioxide emissions by more than 17.6 billion pounds per year, and cut oil consumption by 22 million barrels annually. Reducing greenhouse gases and decreasing our dependence upon oil is an essential component in protecting our environment and increasing national security.

The Governor's office has indicated that several criteria are essential to make high-speed rail a reality in California: (1) we must have a strong federal financial commitment; (2) California must develop a public-private partnership to attract private capital; and (3) state and local governments must participate. These are the essential ingredients to the success of high-speed rail in California.

But the order of implementation is also important. The State of California must lead. It must be the engine propelling this high-speed train down the track to success. Without state government's leadership and early financial commitment, the dream of high-speed rail will run out of steam.

Last November, voters passed Proposition 1B, a bond act that provides \$19.9 billion for highway, rail and mass transportation. \$4 billion of this bond money is allocated for public transit. Let's use \$50 million of Prop 1B funds to get this project moving right now. Critical rights of way need to be purchased, and engineering and environmental reviews need to be completed.

To address the legitimate concerns of the Governor's office, Prop 1B funding should be meted out in increments, with specific conditions and goals to be met before the next increment of money is released. For example: Step 1 could be the development of a viable public-private partnership with tentative commitments from financial partners. Step 2 could

be the identification of rights of way to be acquired and the estimate of cost to acquire the land. Step 3 could be the preliminary engineering for one or more segments of the line.

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- Lt. Governor Garamendi